DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 139 JC 840 595

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TITLE Assisting Student Learning.
INSTITUTION Center for the Study of Community Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT Center for the Study of Community Colleges Bulletin; Iss 14 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ancillary School Services; College Curriculum; Community Colleges; Computer Oriented Programs; Curriculum Development; Educational Diagnosis; *Faculty Development; Professional Development; Program Descriptions; *Student Personnel Services; *Student Placement; *Testing Programs; *Tutorial Programs; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

This issue of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) "Bulletin" describes various academic support services provided by community colleges to strengthen instruction and to assist staff members in their own development. Introductory comments discuss the relationship between academic support services and classroom instruction, with particular focus on the role of these services in expanding the opportunities for learning available to educationally disadvantaged students. The next section considers the role of student assessment and placement, focusing on comprehensive assessment and placement services for new students, testing in basic skill areas, and mandatory placement programs ensuring student enrollment in curricula appropriate to skill levels. The next section looks at efforts to provide appropriate curricula in a clearly defined sequence, providing examples of major curricula revision projects in community colleges. Next, a discussion is presented of the role of tutoring, counseling, and technological supports in a total academic system. This discussion highlights the use of learning resource centers, integrated support services, and the use of Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations (PLATO) at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC). Finally, the importance of professional development programs in improving the instructional process is underscored. The "Bulletin" includes a brief description of CCC's academic support services workshop. (HB)

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Issue 14
1984

# BULLETIN

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# Assisting Student Learning

*This issue of the* **Bulletin** *was prepared by Don Barshis, Professor of English, Loop College, and Former Executive Director of the Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, City Colleges of Chicago.*

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JC 840 595

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# Assisting Student Learning

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Until the nation's common school system turns out competent, literate graduates as the rule rather than the exception, community colleges adhering to open admissions policies must continue to find ways to educate significant numbers of underprepared college aspirants. The strains put upon traditional teaching resources and support personnel—faculty and counselors—have compelled these colleges to explore new areas of assistance for their instructional teams in order to expand the opportunities for learning available to educationally disadvantaged students.

The various academic support services described in this report in no way substitute for quality classroom instruction; rather, they augment a resource that has become overtaxed with problems not previously experienced by today's teaching professionals. Competent classroom instructors can still work wonders for underprepared students, provided that their classroom populations are reasonably homogeneous in entry-level skills and that their skills levels roughly correspond to the entry prerequisites for the course. But, if these conditions are not present—as they often are not in colleges with loosely run assessment programs, inadequate course prerequisites, or insufficient developmental level courses—then not even the best classroom magician can conjure up substantial course achievement rates. More often than not the instructor chooses to grade on potential and not actual achievement, thus passing the problem onto the next instructor in the next course in a program sequence.

Academic support services assist instructors determined to create optimum learning conditions for their programs. These services provide a systematic "wrap-around" for equally systematic instruction that focuses on student learning. This instruction is typically based on Benjamin Bloom's Mastery Learning, Fred Keller's Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), or the different Competency-Based Education (CBE) programs operating nationally. It has at its core individualization within a highly structured learning program designed to bring students to greater levels of achievement than before deemed possible. When instructors work to provide these ideal learning conditions amidst the time constraints of the typical college term, they require assistance in increasing "time-on-task" opportunities for their students and in addressing the learning styles and cultural characteristics of heterogenous groups. This issue of the **Bulletin** describes various kinds of modifications that colleges have made to strengthen the instructional services and to assist staff members in their own development.

## Assessment/Placement

Most colleges serving a significant number of academically underprepared students have either resolved or are confronting the issue of whether or not to institute comprehensive assessment and placement procedures for new students. Required testing in reading, writing, and math—with scores or grade level equivalents used as the basis for placement into the institutions' entry-level curriculum options—is the most common variant of a comprehensive assessment/placement program. Other institutions administer tests in one or two of these basic skills areas and supplement their assessment data with required admission tests on such national achievement measures as the ACT or College Board examinations. Still others use combinations of skills assessment, prior school

achievement data, and personal interviews to arrive at program placement decisions.

In each instance where a college or district has decided to institute a comprehensive assessment program, the issue has surfaced as to whether the assessment results will be used for mandatory placement of students into entry-level curriculum appropriate to their skills levels. Some institutions – Miami-Dade, Essex County (New Jersey), New York, and Chicago – have received national attention for their policies of required placement of underprepared students in remedial or developmental programs. Other districts offer students the option of restricting course loads or mixing developmental courses with college-level courses and registering simultaneously for special study skills or support courses in learning resource centers. Some institutions still allow students to select all their own classes even though assessment recommendations call for some kind of compensatory course work. Each of these positions has its own philosophical and often political/social basis, and it is not the purpose of this paper to argue the merits of one over the other when the conditions faced by each institution may necessitate the policy it has developed.

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Among the more exemplary approaches to comprehensive assessment in the nation's community colleges are the Los Angeles District's Access project – a computer-supported assessment procedure that yields academic and career interest data on new students; Miami-Dade's Camelot/-RSVP computer-driven continuous assessment of student progress that features periodic personalized student progress letters; and Valencia (Florida) Community College's mail-in assessment program with student self-programming recommendations showing that the majority of new students will seek developmental course help for subjects in which they feel deficient. In order to ensure the best matches possible between instructors and students, a number of colleges, including Pima (Arizona), Triton (Illinois), and Mountain View (Texas), have incorporated into their programs such additional assessment features as cognitive mapping and learning styles inventories. City Colleges of Chicago has augmented its already comprehensive assessment/placement program with portfolio assessment services as well as the career profiling resources of its Career Development and Placement Center. While each of these and the many other assessment programs nationally do not have all the answers, they attempt to address a major issue colleges are increasingly facing – how to match students in widely varied stages of academic preparation with the existing programs and resources of the institution at the beginning of the student's academic career in order to avoid wasting the time and energies of both.

## Appropriate Curricula in a Clearly Defined Sequence

If a college's assessment/placement program relies on reading, writing, and math competencies (as determined by assessment instruments), then an appropriate curriculum is one that uses those competencies as entry prerequisites and controls student entry into programs requiring more advanced proficiencies. For example, the City Colleges of Chicago Nursing Program requires that students read at the 11th grade level; write reasonably literate, standard English paragraphs; and compute at the intermediate algebra level – all competencies measurable by the battery of placement tests that each new CCC student must take. Students who score below these competency levels are not denied entry to the City Colleges, an avowed open admission institution. They are, however, prevented from entering the nursing sequence in their first term, and instead are being directed to a comprehensive remedial/developmental sequence whose exit competencies are those very same Nursing Program entrance requirements. Upon institution of this rigorous curriculum sequence and the establishment of direct correlations between placement practices and program requirements, the number of CCC nursing students who passed their state certification exam on the first try jumped (depending on school) by 10 to 28% over a three year period, with two of the colleges achieving over 97% pass rates.

Similar rigorous approaches to creating appropriate entry level curricula have characterized the major renewal efforts in general education at Miami-Dade, in the developmental program at New York's La Guardia Community College, and in the St. Louis Community College and the Cuyahoga (Ohio) Community College District. Such efforts are not without problems. Faculty resistance to what they perceive as a mechanistic approach to curriculum and instruction makes *competency* a fighting word in a number of academic departments. The design of lower-level remedial/developmental curricula to serve the academically underprepared student is often viewed by faculty professionals as a demeaning use of their time and talent. In addition, the proliferation of large scale developmental education programs often comes at the expense of favorite elective courses that have suffered from declining enrollments in a time of overall academic decline. Finally, legitimate concern over issues of declining levels of college-level or

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critical literacy has focused attention on the quality of teaching and levels of expectations present in many of the larger remedial programs in the nation's community colleges. These and other issues surrounding curriculum design and renewal efforts make the process of major curriculum change and improvement a lengthy and frequently embittering experience, although serious educators seem undaunted in their willingness to undertake the challenge.

## Tutoring, Counseling, and Technological Supports

Tutoring, counseling, and technological supports may be best understood in the larger context of the total academic system. The key to understanding successful practices in the area of learning supports lies in the idea of *focused* services. Many colleges have put large sums of money – much of it from grants – into creating elaborate paraprofessional resources that soon disappear upon grant expiration. If the resources achieve institutionalization, they are often collected into a separate Learning Resource Center whose services await those students who are willing to use them. Unfortunately, the students who most need these services are the least likely to seek them out *on their own*. As a result, tutors, counselors, and the array of technological supports to improve the quality of student learning often fail to assist their most needy clients. Accordingly, they suffer from major image problems stemming from this underutilization, problems that make these services easy targets whenever budget cutbacks must be made.

A number of colleges have addressed the problem of how best to utilize support resources by integrating them into the same academic programs that they were designed to augment. In Chicago, tutors have left the Resource Center to sit in developmental classes and work directly with the students in group activities. Supplemental instruction carried on by peer tutors – modeled on the successful University of Missouri at St. Louis program – extends learning time in difficult, high attrition classes at Triton (Illinois). Teacher assistants work with master instructors in large Keller Plan PSI classes at Cuyahoga (Ohio). In many colleges, counselors teach study skills components of developmental reading classes; run small-scale orientation programs for special interest groups of new students, such as displaced homemakers or Haitian refugees; provide phone call follow-ups of absent students for developmental education faculty; and actively pursue failing students to match them with support services before too much time elapses in the term.

Other colleges integrate open computer lab resources into the total instruction program as an additional learning support, all the while training students and faculty alike to become literate and active users of information technology's many resources. The Maricopa district's exemplary computer literacy program for faculty has brought nearly half of the teaching faculty to a high level of computer sophistication. The City Colleges of Chicago's extensive Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations (PLATO) program provides students with over 250 terminals and a rich array of instructional supplements

# The Academic Support Services Workshop in Chicago

In May of 1983, City College of Chicago hosted the sixth in a series of workshops sponsored by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in its "Advancing the Liberal Arts" Project. The workshop, entitled "Academic Support Services," featured presentations by Benjamin Bloom of the University of Chicago and representatives from each of the urban community college districts participating in the project. Bloom's keynote presentation, "The Two Sigma Effect," described several alterable variables in the teaching/learning process that could bring conventional group instructional processes closer to the superior achievement levels possible in one-on-one tutoring or individual instruction. District representatives who highlighted features from their own college district's support services covered such topics as comprehensive assessment programs, model developmental programs, applied research projects, and creative uses of institutional technological supports to augment the instructional process. City Colleges of Chicago faculty and staff presented aspects of the CCC developmental program, research studies conducted by CCC's Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning on effective teaching and learning, and methods of using the CCC PLATO computer support system to supplement instruction. Arthur Cohen of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, who summarized the day's proceedings, placed the emphases on academic support services in a proper historical context, noting that the focus has shifted from programs that merely sorted students to programs that provide supports that enable students to succeed in their academic pursuits. He left the group with the warning that until faculty and staff in the community colleges fully accept the belief that students have the right to succeed and act accordingly in their service, even the best designed comprehensive educational program and support system will not reach its full potential.

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through CCC's linkage with both the University of Illinois and Control Data's Minneapolis program bank. CCC instructors require developmental students to log specific numbers of hours on PLATO as part of their course requirements, and faculty regularly develop new PLATO lessons as part of their work in PLATO Users and PLATO Authors in-service courses. In every one of these instances, concerned educators recognize the need for extending worthwhile learning supports beyond the walls of their offices, classrooms, or centers into the very core of the instructional program in order to get a maximum return on resource investment. The "before and after" studies that have been conducted by many researchers to determine the effects of this active use of support resources have justified their efforts.

*A professional development program that occurs within the context of a total organizational development program has the greatest likelihood of success . . .*

## Professional Development Programs

Professional development programs for faculty and staff represent the growing recognition among community college leaders that the human resources at the heart of the instructional process – the faculty – need renewal and formal organizational support as they face both a static job market and the pressures of serving a nontraditional student body in various stages of academic preparedness. This need is shared as well by the administrative and support staff who attend to the instructional process.

Many institutions have made formal commitments of resources to foster instructional, personal, or organizational development activities among their personnel. Instructional development has received the dominant emphasis among in-service programs nationally, essentially because administrators and trustees want to see some kind of tangible results for their commitment of resources. The track record of these programs on effective pedagogy has been mixed, with the better programs avoiding proscriptive or formulaic approaches to improve teaching. Master teacher seminars, week-end retreats to examine curriculum and instructional effectiveness, and continuing education or graduate credit equivalency for courses in pedagogy have all proven to be successful approaches to improving instructional quality.

Recently much emphasis has been directed to the personal or human development needs of faculty and staff. Programs to address teacher burn-out, retraining needs, personal problems, and life cycle changes experienced by faculty have received increased support from administrators who are concerned with rampant morale declines among their aging and career-atrophied instructors. Again, large urban districts like Chicago, Cuyahoga, Dallas, Maricopa, and Miami-Dade have taken the lead in tailoring development programs to the human needs of their faculty. The Maricopa combination of early-retirement, flex-time, and optional benefits has removed the shackle of forced employment from the teaching staff. Cuyahoga's Scholar-in-Residence Program has rekindled professional identity interest among the staff by utilizing the talents of the faculty to entertain, discuss, and plan as scholar equals with their colleagues and administrators. Chicago's joint Teacher Education Program with the Institute for Psychoanalysis has taken more than 100 CCC's faculty through self-awareness curricula on interpersonal transaction, crosscultural communication, and the teacher as learner.

A professional development program that occurs within the context of an institution's total organizational development program has the greatest likelihood of success in improving the quality of an institution's academic life. An organizational development program can include management training programs for administrators that lead to efforts in improving the collegial atmosphere of the institution by regular information-sharing and policy-making sessions that involve all sectors of the college community. In addition, new budgeting formulas can be developed that set aside discretionary funds for specific developmental uses of faculty and staff. The Board of Trustees in the Maricopa district has created an excellent model in its Joint Administrative-Faculty-Trustee Planning Council which serves as an internal funding agency for quality proposals submitted by members of the college community intent on better serving their students. Equipment for reading labs, new computer resources, and reassigned time for special projects for educationally disadvantaged students have all been funded by grants from the Council as the Maricopa district has dedicated itself to significant organizational development over the last several years.

The variety of academic support services reviewed in this issue of the **Bulletin** are characterized by one important feature: they are components in their institutions' *systematic* effort to augment the instructional process. Administrators, faculty, support staff who work in or orchestrate systematic, comprehensive support programs know the difficulties endemic to the creation of such programs – staff resistance, bureaucratic foul-ups, questionable funding sources, insufficient data, among other evaluation problems, and territorial boundaries that inhibit cross-institutional management of the programs. Yet the results achieved by integrated efforts make systematic design the only path to follow in the development and refinement of a support service program.



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